

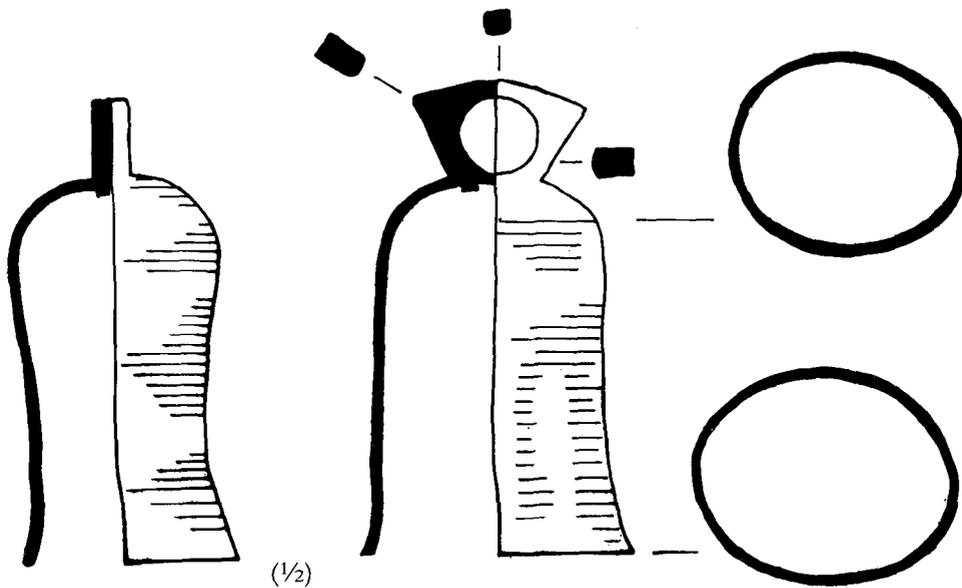
A ROMAN BELL FROM THE THAMES

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A bronze bell of the Roman period found on the northern foreshore of the Thames has recently been acquired by the Museum of London.¹

The instrument, which is in fine condition, consists of a body and a polygonal handle, with a circular central hole, and is cast in one piece. Its total height is 124mm. The body is tulip shaped, narrowing at the middle and flaring towards an elliptical mouth which has maximum and minimum diameters of 72 and 56mm respectively. The thickness of the bronze is 2–2.5mm. The clapper, which would have been of iron, has not survived but inside the bell at the top are two small holes, probably for the attachment of a loop from which it was suspended. When struck the bell has a fine ringing tone.

There is no stratigraphical indication of the date of the instrument but parallels have been found in Roman contexts. The angular form of the handle is characteristic of many Roman bells and there are several examples from British sites which include Camerton, Fishbourne and Verulamium.² Leaving aside the design of the handle, bells were made in a variety of forms. The examples cited above are all round or four sided, shapes that are more common than the tulip form, but some exact parallels to the Thames bell are known. One comes from Binnington Carr in Yorkshire, while the British Museum possesses several undated bells of similar shape.³ The form is widespread on the continent with examples known from Ampurias in Spain and from sites in Germany.⁴ One



from Mainz is almost exactly the same height as the Thames bell, while two from Köln are little larger. Another bell in Köln museum which is of tulip shape but with a differently designed handle is displayed on a bronze collar, as a cow bell.⁵

In the absence of further evidence it is difficult to ascribe a definite function to the Thames bell. Bells (*tintinnabula*) are frequently found on Roman sites but had only limited importance as musical instruments. They sometimes had atropaic significance and were rung in various religious ceremonies.⁶ Small bells were attached to the costumes of some dancers, illustrated on figurines and sarcophagi, and sets of bells were hung in doorways.⁷ The size of the Thames example however precludes such use. Bells were also rung to give signals and alarms and, as today, were hung around the necks of animals⁸—certainly suggesting a possible use for the London bell.

NOTES

1. Accession No. 80.94. I am grateful to Dr. Hugh Chapman for bringing the bell to my attention and to Jenny Hall for the drawing.
2. W. J. Wedlake *Excavations at Camerton* (1958) 258 No. 29 Fig. 59; B. Cunliffe *Excavations at Fishbourne 1961-69* (London 1971) 112 Fig. 46, Nos. 107, 108; S. S. Frere *Verulamium Excavations I* (London 1972) 126, No. 93. See also J. P. Bushe-Fox *Richborough I* (London 1926) 45 No. 15; 4 (1949) Pl. LVI No. 271. Many bells in the British Museum have angular handles, for example, Inv. Nos. 1976 1-6-13; 1976 1-6-17, and the form can be seen in collections of many continental museums.
3. Binnington Carr *Proc. Soc. Ant. Lond.* 13 (1889-1891) 29-31. The bell was found in ploughing, but in association with silver coins of the first century AD. (BM Inv. No. 49 5-19-12; WT 938).
4. Bells from Ampurias are on display in the Museo Arqueologico, Barcelona; Mainz, G. Behrens 'Neue Funde aus dem Kastell Mainz' *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 7 (1912) 88 Abb 4, 9; Kastell Hüfingen, *Obergermanisches-Raetisches Limes B.Bd.V* No. 62A. I am grateful to Dr. Chapman for the two German references.
5. Römisches Germanisches Museum Köln Nos. 8984, 8985, 4129.
6. Plautus *Pseud.* 332. On bells in general see E. Esperandieu in Daremberg and Saglio *Dictionnaire . . .* (Paris 1912) art *tintinnabulum*.
7. G. Pesce *Sarcophagi Romani di Sardegna* (Rome 1957) 27ff. with bibliography.
8. Apuleius *Met.* X.18; Lucian *Luc.* 48.